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ABSTRACT

The essence of a healthy democracy is open dialogue about issues of public concern. An integral part of the training of young citizens, therefore, includes the discussion of controversial social, political, and economic policies. The use of classroom discussions as a pedagogical technique to examine controversial issues is explored by considering: (1) the nature of controversial issues discussions; (2) the importance of discussion in social studies instruction; (3) what is known about the use of controversial issues discussions in social studies; and (4) suggestions for implementing controversial issues discussions in the classroom. (DB)

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Controversial Issues in the Classroom

by Angela M. Harwood and Carole L. Hahn

The essence of a healthy democracy is open dialogue about issues of public concern. An integral part of the training of young citizens, therefore, includes the discussion of controversial social, political, and economic policies. This ERIC Digest explores the use of classroom discussions as a pedagogical technique to examine controversial issues by considering (1) the nature of controversial issues discussions, (2) the importance of discussion in social studies instruction, (3) what is known about the use of controversial issues discussions in social studies, and (4) suggestions for implementing controversial issues discussions in the classroom.

What Is a Controversial Issues Discussion? A controversial issues discussion is defined as reflective dialogue among students, or between students and teachers, about an issue on which there is disagreement. Typically a discussion is sparked by a question or assertion made either by a student or teacher. The ensuing dialogue then allows for the presentation of supportive evidence, comments, and the expression of differing points of view. Discussion is therefore, by nature, an interactive endeavor, and reflective dialogue engenders listening and responding to ideas expressed by one's peers.

An idea or viewpoint may be considered an issue if a number of people disagree about statements and assertions made in connection with the proposition. Issues that deeply divide a society, that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems, are considered controversial (Stradling 1984).

Given this definition, the scope of issues that might be considered controversial is quite broad. The content of issues may vary from local problems to issues on the international scene. The censoring of books in a school library, the immigration policy of the United States, and the environmental state of the world would each prove to be rich subjects for controversial issue discussions. Although each reflects a problem area at a different level of public policymaking, they are all topics that foster a wide range of sharply differing opinions.

Why Is a Controversial Issues Discussion an Important Element of Social Studies Instruction? Many reasons have been given to support the use of controversial issues discussions in social studies classrooms. Three of the most prevalent are (1) preparing students for their roles as citizens in a pluralistic democracy, (2) developing critical thinking skills, and (3) improving interpersonal skills.

Citizenship Preparation. We must prepare students, as young citizens, to grapple with a wide array of social problems. Newmann (1989) argues that the main task for democratic citizens is to deliberate with other citizens about the nature of the public good and how to achieve it. Social studies classrooms should serve, therefore, as a laboratory in which students can experiment with democratic processes.

Critical Thinking. The teaching of controversial issues is also proposed as a means to develop students' critical thinking. Through discussion of controversial issues, students develop cognitive skills, such as constructing hypotheses and collecting and evaluating evidence. They also gain insights from sharing information with their peers.

Interpersonal Skills. As students participate in discussions, they also develop important attitudes and communication skills, such as listening carefully, responding empathetically, speaking persuasively, and cooperating readily, with others in a group. Well-managed discussions also promote tolerance of diverse viewpoints on any single issue.

What Is Known about the Effects of Controversial Issue Discussions? For the past 25 years, scholars in the social studies field have been examining the effects of controversial issues discussion through empirical research. The line of inquiry was sparked by Patrick's ground-breaking review of political socialization research, in which he noted that educational programs might have a greater impact on the development of democratic attitudes "if they were conducted in an atmosphere more conducive to inquiry and openmindedness" (1967, 71). A number of researchers have subsequently investigated the role of discussion in preparing students for citizenship.

Early investigations of the effects of discussion indicated that students who participated in classroom discussions often reported more positive political attitudes and higher participation in political activities. Adults who remembered participating in school discussions and debates scored higher on measures of political efficacy than did their counterparts (Patrick 1967). Long and Long (1975) found that controversial issues discussion in schools was positively correlated with following current events in the media and discussing political matters with friends and family.

An important element of productive controversial issues discussions emphasized by researchers is the importance of creating a classroom climate which is conducive to the free expression of ideas. Taken as a whole, this research suggests that when students are allowed to discuss controversial issues in an open supportive classroom environment there are often positive outcomes for students' feelings of political interest, efficacy, confidence, and trust (Hahn, Angell & Tocci 1988). Additionally, issue discussions have been shown to improve civic tolerance (Goldenson 1978) and increase interest in social issues (Curtis & Shaver 1980).

Particular climate variables that contribute to the positive effects of controversial issues discussion include the opportunity to hear a wide range of views and students' perceived freedom to express ideas (Ehman 1977) and student's perceptions of teachers' willingness to discuss ideas (Long & Long 1975). Each of these elements of classroom climate, in combination with the discussion of controversial issues, has been shown to relate to positive civic attitudes.

In addition to stimulating the development of positive political attitudes, controversial issues discussions generate more favorable attitudes toward social studies classes in general. Students

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have expressed both a desire to study controversial social issues and more positive feelings about social studies classes that included discussion formats (Remy 1972). It is probable that with more discussions of controversial issues fewer students would feel that social studies subjects are dull and irrelevant to the real world, as has so often been reported in surveys on student perceptions of social studies.

What Are Key Considerations for Implementing Controversial Issues Discussions in the Classroom? Conducting beneficial discussions of controversial issues is an art that requires skill and practice. Teachers must pay careful attention to preparation for discussions, and the role they will take during the conduct of the discussion to ensure that interactions will be fruitful. Each of the following points should be addressed.

Selecting Issues. In selecting discussion issues, teachers should consider their students' interest, experience, and expertise regarding the issue; the relevance of issues to their students' lives; their students' maturity level; and the significance of the issue to society.

Preparing Students for Discussion. Given the dearth of discussions in today's classrooms, teachers must be willing to invest time to train their students in discussion techniques. Teachers and students should cooperatively determine guidelines for interaction, and both should realize that to establish a rhythm and flow for discussions will take practice and patience.

Providing Adequate Information Sources. Ensuring that students are adequately prepared to handle an issue in a discussion format requires that teachers provide informational resources, and that students have an opportunity to acquire background knowledge prior to the discussion. Background information may be provided through readings, lectures, films, guest speakers, or field trips. To encourage participatory citizenship through the exploration of public issues, the National Council for the Social Studies instituted the Public Issues Program (PIP) in 1984. PIP offers a variety of materials and formats for the discussion of important social and political issues, including the town meeting sessions affiliated with the National Issues Forums, the Jefferson Meetings on the Constitution, the Great Decisions texts and tapes, and the teaching units included in the Public Issues Series (McFarland 1989).

Establishing an Open Discussion Climate. The creation of an intellectually safe environment for student participation is one of the most important elements of successful discussions. Teachers should model appropriate discussion behaviors by carefully listening to and respecting students' contributions. Teachers must tolerate widely divergent views and encourage expression of them in order to establish a non-threatening arena for the exposition of ideas. Students must understand that they may not interrupt each other's comments, and that they may disagree without being disagreeable.

Maintaining Focus and Direction. One of the most common problems faced by discussion leaders is the tendency for a stimulating discussion to wander off topic. By developing a discussion agenda and using the blackboard or an overhead projector to summarize and organize student contributions, teachers can provide the necessary structure for constructive discussions. An agenda for the discussion might include defining the problem, summarizing and analyzing evidence, suggesting possible solutions, hypothesizing consequences of solutions, and relating the issue to the personal experience of the students.

Ensuring Intellectual Balance. One of the primary roles of the teacher in moderating classroom discussions is to ensure that students are exposed to the full range of perspectives on any issue considered. Teachers should solicit a wide array of opinions about discussed issues, and expose students to a best case, fair hearing of competing points of view. If important viewpoints on a given issue are not expressed, they may be elicited through careful teacher questioning; or they may be provided by asking students to role-play someone who would present that perspective.

Encouraging Equal Participation. To achieve a level of balanced participation it is often necessary to actively draw reticent students into the discussion and to limit the contributions of more outspoken students. The establishment of a participation system is generally helpful in addressing this problem. Student participation may be directed, for instance, through the use of coins or tokens. Each student is given the same number of tokens, which they "spend" as they make a contribution to the discussion. After all students have exhausted their supply of tokens, the tokens are then redivided. Such a method for directing discussion will help to equalize the participation of individual students.

The Expression of Teachers' Personal Views. Teachers who take a stand on controversial issues in their classroom must be willing to clearly indicate that it is only one opinion, and must be willing to provide the evidence on which their decision was based. Additionally, because all views expressed in discussions of controversial issues are subject to question and scrutiny, teachers must be willing to reflect upon their own stances and allow students to challenge them. Taking a stand on an issue is the right of any citizen in a democratic society; teachers must be careful, however, that in so doing they do not adversely affect the ability of their students to freely examine the issues at hand.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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